

From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Use of Development Programmes to Restore Civic Trust in Northern Afghanistan

Brenna Dorrance (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine)

The kind of reconciliation[...]needed to affect a transition from[...]war to democracy requires a high level of political trust and a shift from relations of mortal enmity to relations of normal political contestation (Nathan 2004, p.2).

Nathan's concept of 'reconciliation' has also been referred to as the 'restoration of civic trust' by the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ, 2008).¹ The 'restoration of civic trust' refers to the idea that citizens of a country must have an 'expectation of commitment to shared norms and values' vertically, from their governments, and horizontally, from their fellow citizens (ICTJ, 2008). In villages in Northern Afghanistan, a French Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), is attempting to restore this civic trust from the grassroots level up. The NGO hopes that by bringing conflicting communities together to work toward common goals trust can be rebuilt that has broken down over years of animosity and conflict.

¹ Thanks to Sandra LaMarque, ACTED Appraisal Monitoring Evaluation Unit (AMEU) Manager for her research, reports, insight and constant monitoring of the projects. This article is based upon collaborative research between Sandra, myself and our respective teams. Sandra remains with ACTED and as such all updated information has been provided through her monitoring reports. This article would not have been possible without her hard work and assistance. Additional thanks to the whole ACTED Afghanistan team, especially the tireless Conflict Resolution Programme Staff.

To this end ACTED has been implementing conflict resolution projects in three very different communities since July 2007. All projects have been funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).² All projects seek to create ‘binding forces’ within the communities by encouraging ‘projects that bring opposing parties together for joint gain’ (Hayner 2002, p. 164). In one community, Khowja Alwan, the organization works with returned refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) on a community building project that strives to pre-empt conflict. The second community in Nahri Shahi District seeks to overcome years of low level conflict surrounding the use of natural resources. The final community in Shoulgara District deals with a land dispute among neighbouring villages that has escalated to open conflict.

All three projects pursue slightly different goals using a general model which has been modified in consultation with local leaders to account for the unique characteristics of each situation. This article will give an overview of each project, explore challenges to the programme’s implementation and then draw some overarching lessons about conflict resolution, development and the restoration of civic trust in Northern Afghanistan.

The Programme

Seeking to unite conflict resolution with development, the programme has four objectives. First, ongoing monitoring and evaluation in an attempt to determine the project’s effectiveness for conflict resolution aims. Second, social capacity building which is referred to as the ‘software component’: the democratic election and

² All funding from USAID was administered by a partner called ARD-Local Governance Community Development, based in Kabul. All interactions between the donor and ACTED took place via ARD-LGCD.

training of an adult Mediation Committee (MC) and a youth Peace Club (PC). Third, tangible development related activities referred to as the ‘hardware component’: the implementation of an MC designed project and one PC designed community-wide activity. Finally, a public outreach component including a puppet show to educate the general public about conflict resolution and begin the process of fostering common norms and values through outreach education.

Programme Background

Olympio Barbanti makes a theoretical case for breaking the ‘vicious cycle in which development leads to conflict, and the lack of conflict resolution practices interferes with further development’ (2004). The primary goal of these Afghan conflict resolution projects is to break that cycle, to encourage development through conflict resolution by strengthening existing community structures and by introducing community-led projects that lessen the conflicts’ impact. The desirable development outcome is designed to only be possible if all parties to the conflict work together, solidifying the communities’ binding forces.

NGOs are often constricted by their donor agencies. As Oxfam has recently pointed out, donors have ‘tended to support projects which yield rapid and visible results, rather than give support to longer-term processes whose benefits are less tangible’ (2008, p. 15). This means, it is often easier to secure funding to build a well than to provide a training programme:

Historically, NGOs are more proficient in delivering “hardware” than “software”. Their role has been primarily to mitigate some of the hardships caused by[...]conflict, rather than address underlying causes, or

support social capital or local leadership (Goodhand 2000, p.10).

ACTED is attempting to put these insights into practice and provide tangible deliverables which will satisfy the donor agency and immediately assist the communities, while supporting the long term social capital building processes that, it is hoped, will prevent future conflicts.

The past experience of ACTED Afghanistan working with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) demonstrated that activities purely focused on fast economic gain or infrastructure solutions are not able to establish long-lasting peace and resolution of conflict. Indeed, past experience has shown that:

[t]he formula for achieving longer-term sustainable impact appears to be a balanced mixture of both economic activity/infrastructure development and improvement of 'soft skills' such as conflict resolution (ACTED Proposal 2007, p.5).

Therefore, not only is the combination of 'software' and 'hardware' components more acceptable to donor agencies, it has also been demonstrated to be more effective. The 'software' component seeks to instigate continuous community discourse through which people of different backgrounds identify obstacles to their peaceful coexistence and ways to remove them. The 'hardware' component further facilitates their discussion, assisting the participants to translate their ideas into a project. The two phases constitute one holistic approach; the first one gathers the communities' momentum for peace and the second one transforms that momentum into action.

When designing these Conflict Resolution projects ACTED Afghanistan analyzed lessons learned from past projects. Some key suggestions that emerged were the need to manage beneficiary

expectation through adequate public outreach programmes, the need for long-term commitment from implementing actors and the need for continuous monitoring. ACTED also drew upon their experience implementing the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) as well as the efforts of other NSP Facilitating Partners such as UN Habitat who provide conflict resolution training to their NSP communities.³

Practical Terms: How the Programme is Implemented

In Afghanistan, the single most popular mechanism for dispute resolution is the *jirga* or *shura*. The *jirga* and the *shura* are fundamentally very similar ‘Afghan informal (non-state) mechanisms of conflict resolution that operate in varying social and tribal contexts’ (Wardak 2003, p.3-5). This article will use the term *shura*. A 2007 Asia Foundation survey showed that 78% of Afghans felt *shuras* were ‘fair and trusted’ (p.71). Many organizations have criticized the traditional *shura*, however, claiming that they:

lack agreed processes, systems, or rules, and usually adopt an authoritarian approach [...] they sometimes act in a way that either fails to resolve disputes fairly, or neglects their underlying causes, which could lay the seeds for future dispute or violence...(Waldman 2008, p.14)

Moreover, *shuras* have been criticized as being:

an ad-hoc reaction...which does not use conflict prevention strategies. It is made up of older men, which excludes women and young people. (CPAU 2008, p.1)

The Afghan government has been working to establish units of local governance based on the traditional concept of the *shura*

³ (Goodhand, 2000) offers further analysis of Afghan Conflict Resolution programmes.

through local Community Development Councils (CDC). The CDC is a recent creation, part of the World Bank/ Afghan Government's 2003 initiative the 'National Solidarity Programme' (NSP). One of NSP's goals is to establish units of local governance throughout rural Afghanistan to be used as mechanisms for development and the creation of civic trust (Torabi 2007, p.5-7). Though the CDC is based on the idea of the *shura* they have some differences, including the mandatory participation of women, the intention that they will be permanent and their formation through democratic elections. As of August 2007, 17,832 CDCs had been created (NSP 2008). Though CDCs officially have some dispute resolution power, they are not yet present in every Afghan community and many have yet to gain local legitimacy.

Any conflict resolution intervention must allow people acting in their own societies [to] create and maintain their own conditions for living together and pursuing a shared goal. (Anderson & Spelten 2000, p.2)

With the goal of using Afghan methods to address Afghan problems, ACTED based the Mediation Committees on the traditional *shura* and NSP CDCs. With the core concepts in place, the conflict resolution programme began implementing in real terms in three Afghan Districts.

Case Studies

Community 1: Khowja Alwan

In December 2005, the Afghan government established Land Allocation Sites as part of the national Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) to help resettle returned refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (ACTED AMEU 2007, p2). All families selected to

participate in the programme satisfied government criteria, which included being categorized as ‘vulnerable’.

The land in Khowja Alwan was irrigated and cultivated until the 1960s by a sophisticated pipeline system. This system was destroyed during the Soviet invasion. The population was forced to leave the area and, since that time, the land has not been developed. Thus, at the beginning of the LAS in 2005, Khowja Alwan was barren, undeveloped land. NGOs have worked with the community to provide shelter, access to water and latrines. Recently, a clinic and school were built on the site. The primary school began operations in March 2008. The site of Khowja Alwan is currently home to about 140 families. ⁴

The LAS, by its very nature, is prone to economic and social marginalisation since it seeks to assist refugees and IDPs. There is a feeling of isolation among Khowja Alwan inhabitants for several reasons. First, they live far from each other on the site and they have not yet recreated social links. Second, most residents feel isolated from the nearby city, and its education and employment opportunities, mostly because they cannot afford the transportation cost. Finally, they feel forgotten by the government because most of Khowja Alwan’s infrastructure has been provided by NGOs (ACTED AMEU 2007, p.6). Young men in Khowja Alwan are particularly prone to dissatisfaction and low self-esteem as they often find themselves unable to support their families (ACTED AMEU 2007, p.5)

Khowja Alwan faces the challenging task of dealing with the social marginalization of its inhabitants. As an artificially created

⁴ . Nationally, the average size of an Afghan family is 7 persons (WFP/MRRD 2004). In Khowja Alwan the average family size is 9 persons according to an April 2008 ACTED baseline survey.

community, the residents have little in common besides the shared experience of having been displaced. They do not share kinship groups or ethnic links and, prior to this project, any sort of unifying local governance structure. All of these factors combine to make the community more vulnerable to disunity and prone to conflict.

There is a fledgling solidarity between Khowja Alwan inhabitants regardless of their diversity. The population has a Tajik majority and Hazara, Pashtun and Uzbek minorities. On average, settlers spent twelve years abroad; 35% in Iran, 40% in Pakistan and 20% as IDPs (ACTED AMEU 2007, p.3). The Khowja Alwan beneficiaries have lived on site an average of nine months. All of these factors contribute to the slow construction of social networks in the settlement (ACTED AMEU 2007, p.3). A C T E D monitors identified economic, physical and social insecurity as the major sources of tension within the settlement. The lack of social networks demonstrates the critical task at hand facing any community empowerment programme. Far from just feeling disconnected from the national government, Khowja Alwan residents do not even feel connected to their neighbours.

To date, the project has successfully established a MC with representatives from all different groups within the settlement. In addition, a representative youth PC has also been elected and both groups have received training from an Afghan NGO partner the 'Co-operation for Peace and Unity' (CPAU). The PC has developed and performed a puppet show to spread the conflict resolution message and regular meetings of both groups are being held.

The Khowja Alwan site experienced some difficulty developing projects that could be approved by USAID. One of their projects, the establishment of six small tailoring centres, was

approved and is now operational. The community's second project, the construction of 'peace halls' where residents could gather to encourage the formation of social bonds was rejected by USAID as the construction plans did not meet the donor's standards. The MC then proposed a third project — the development and maintenance of a transport link from Khowja Alwan to the nearby city of Pul-i-Kumri. This project was designed to help alleviate some of the economic, physical and social insecurity experienced by all residents. This proposal, however, was rejected because USAID guidelines for this project stipulate no one item may cost over \$5,000 USD and all vehicles purchased must come from the USA (Sandra LaMarque, personal communication, 28 May 2008). The condition that all vehicles purchased should originate in the USA demonstrates the often criticized political dimension of aid. Many donors place conditions on their aid that bolster their home economy, often at the expense of appropriate and effective assistance. While this is most publicized in relation to food aid, in this case it meant the MC's transport proposal was rejected.⁵ The MC, not fazed by the rejection of two proposals, developed a livestock project whereby community members would care for animals collectively and women would be involved in animal product processing. This livestock project is expected to meet with USAID approval.

The PC projects were more successful; volleyball and football grounds were created. At the handover ceremony, boys from all sides of the community formed teams for a public football match attended by community members. This creation of public space for use by all inhabitants begins the long process of community building at the heart of the project in Khowja Alwan.

⁵ While USAID does allow for derogations to some of their regulations, in this case it was ARD who refused the MCs request.

Community 2: Nahri Shahi District

The conflict in the Nahri Shahi District communities of Nawakel-Kampirak (hereafter 'Nawakel') and Kampirak-Watani (hereafter 'Kampirak') has historical roots, but now mainly relates to resource access and concerns over community honour. As the roots of this conflict are complicated, only the most recent issues will be highlighted.

Nawakel is located 3 km up-stream from Kampirak; it is their joint use of water that forms the basis of their tensions. They are both Pashto settlements but belong to different *qawm* (or networks). Kampirak, with 370 families is more populated than Nawakel with only 200 families. This has led to Kampirak being awarded more development projects from the government, which has led to some resentment from Nawakel.

From 1992-1996, during the Civil War in Mazar, two main political parties fought for control of the area around Kampirak. The Jumbesh Party drew support from Nawakel and the Jamiat drew support from Kampirak. The frontline of the conflict was essentially located between Kampirak and Nawakel villages. Both villages suffered deaths resulting from the conflict. Previous minor tensions about natural resources were exacerbated when the two villages were pushed into the wider conflict by the warring political parties. Relations deteriorated further when the Taliban arrived and most Nawakel people joined them. Most tensions were hidden, however, due to mutual fear of the Taliban.

After the fall of the Taliban regime the hidden resentments reappeared. The first open dispute was around 2005. Both villages claimed ownership of land that Nawakel proposed to use for a new

road. The dispute was resolved by the District Governor, however, tensions remained. Since the land conflict, Nawakel inhabitants have refused to go to the main mosque on Fridays because it is located in Kampirak. Similarly, before the conflict, elders from both villages would gather in order to settle disputes. Since the land quarrel, these elders' *shuras* have not met. Now, a water conflict has become the main problem between Kampirak and Nawakel. Nawakel residents sometimes divert the stream that joins the two communities that is needed by Kampirak inhabitants to irrigate their fields. This leads to ever increasing resentment between the two villages.

The NSP programme is being implemented in both Nawakel and Kampirak. ACTED decided, therefore, to work within the NSP framework by creating one joint MC from the two CDCs. Previously elected CDC members stood as candidates for the MC. In this way the existing CDCs were strengthened and there was no power struggle among existing local governance structures and the new MC.

In August 2007, ACTED organised a launch meeting to officially begin the conflict resolution project in the area. The men's meeting was organised in the main mosque of Kampirak village. The presence of representatives from both villages was highly symbolic since it was the first time in two years that they had gathered together at the mosque. After long negotiations, the women's meeting was organized in Nawakel. Hospitality is an important value in Afghan society, with respect being required for all guests. It also involves reciprocity: if Kampirak inhabitants invite Nawakel inhabitants to their community, they are expecting to be invited in return, and vice versa. Thus, throughout the implementation of the project, meetings will rotate between the two locations to encourage

this hospitality exchange between the two villages. It is hoped this will highlight a common custom between the conflicting parties and provide a starting point in re-establishing shared norms and values.

In December 2007, men and women from the Mediation Committee voted to dig wells to address the conflict over water access. The proposal was to dig two deep wells and to divert Nawakel's excess water back into the stream for use by Kampirak. This proposal was, however, rejected by the donor. USAID determined that in order for the well project to meet US Government environmental protection and engineering standards it would cost more than the entire three projects combined. Thus, the MC was required to develop a second proposal.

The women representatives to the MC saw this as an opportunity to address the lack of livelihood opportunities for women. They proposed a project whereby livestock would be purchased between the two communities. The care of the animals would be shared as would the revenue from selling animal products. This project has recently been given full approval by the donor and its implementation will begin soon.

It is not yet known if the MC will continue to meet after ACTED withdraws from the community, but it is clear that the lessons of conflict mitigation are being followed. Over the past nine months, residents have become accustomed to gathering together to discuss issues that arise between the two villages. Even if the MC never meets again in its current form, the culture of mitigation and communication is being established and there appears to be local motivation to continue this system into the future.

Community 3: Shoulgara District

The conflict in Shoulgara District is complicated and long standing. It involves many factors which, concentrated in the same place, are potentially explosive: historical grievances, unequal repartition of resources, recent impoverishment of the majority of the population, conflict over pastureland with unclear legal status, and the incapacity of the old conflict mitigation bodies and local authorities to solve the dispute. Though this is a fascinating area, a full analysis of the conflict falls outside the scope of this article thus only a brief synopsis is provided.⁶

The conflict is primarily between an ethnically diverse *manteqa* (cluster of smaller villages) called Astaer Kot and the Kuchi village of Karbosi. The Karbosi Kuchis are ethnic Pashtuns originally from Kandahar.⁷ Traditionally, they only travelled to Karbosi during the summers but, about fifteen years ago, they settled permanently mainly because of dangers along their migration route. There are approximately 100 families living in Karbosi.

Astaer Kot, a cluster of nine smaller hamlets with approximately 1,500 families has an ethnically diverse population, with a Pashtun majority and Arab, Tajik and Turkmen minorities. The older Pashtun settlements are located near the river and benefit from irrigated land. The other villages, including Karbosi, only have access to rain-fed land and pastureland. Tensions related to resource

⁶ For a more in depth analysis please see ACTED AMEU's conflict analysis report to be published in July 2008.

⁷ The Kuchis are the nomadic tribes of Afghanistan. Traditionally, they travelled from the South to the North to graze their animals. Many began settling in the North often as a result of disruption to their migration routes through armed conflict and land mines. They were assigned some public lands approximately 40 years ago as part of the State's Pashtunisation policy, which has caused some of the basis for conflicts continuing until today.

access have always existed, but they became more prevalent after the droughts of 2001–2003.

The main dispute between these two villages is, ostensibly, over the pastureland that geographically separates them. The Astaer Kot residents, due to decreasing availability of cultivatable lands brought on by drought, began to cultivate the pasturelands. The Kuchis continued to use the pasturelands for grazing their livestock. Both villages claim the rights to this land and several attempts to bring the issue to District authorities have failed to resolve the dispute. Officially, the disputed area is classified as ‘public lands’ meaning that it should be under government ownership. However, there is a long history of successive governments using pasturelands for political objectives and, as a result, actual ownership remains unclear while personal feelings towards these lands are tied up in other, often unrelated, historical grievances.

The historic tensions between the villages intensified in 2006 when an NGO dug a well in Karbosi, signalling that the Kuchis intended to settle in the area permanently. The NGO did not conduct a successful public outreach campaign to explain why Karbosi and not neighbouring villages was to receive a well, and apparently did not understand the possible consequences of the Karbosi well.⁸ The people of Astaer Kot reacted to the well by gathering and walking towards Karbosi village. The Kuchi inhabitants felt threatened and started to shoot in the air towards Astaer Kot. Since then, relations between the two villages have drastically deteriorated.

⁸ Though in recent years most NGOs have adopted a ‘do no harm’ policy in their work, there are still many examples such as this of an aid intervention that creates more conflict than it resolves. Ultimately, it is difficult for any outside organization to understand all the nuance and possible consequences of aid work. This difficulty forms a major criticism of aid work in humanitarian assistance literature.

There has been little interaction between the *manteqa* and Karbosi. It seems that Karbosi village suffers from, at least partially self-inflicted, isolation which has led to it being marginalized. In contrast to the other villagers, Karbosi inhabitants never come to the main mosque on Fridays and never partake in communal activities. Before the project, there was mutual fear and suspicion between the two communities. The leaders of Astaer Kot accused the Karbosi inhabitants of being 'linked to Al Qaeda'. Meanwhile, Karbosi residents claim that they are being persecuted by the inhabitants of Astaer Kot. It was only after long negotiations that three Karbosi representatives agreed to attend the project's first official meeting.

The project in Shoulgara has come a long way since leaders from both communities were reluctant to be in the same room together. A MC and a PC have both been elected and participated in training and outreach activities. Each hamlet of the Astaer Kot *manteqa* has one female and one male representative on the MC and Karbosi has three males and three females. This makes the Shoulgara MC the largest of the three projects.

In December 2007, the Shoulgara MC voted to use their block grant to begin a livestock project. The communities planned to buy sheep which would then graze on the previously contested pastureland. The MC proposed to have a centre that would collect and process all the products from these animals. Women from all the villages were to be involved in the processing centres and other community members would work together on the farm, with all resources shared under the auspices of the MC. The farm's location on the disputed pastureland was symbolic and was meant to show a desire for reconciliation.

Unfortunately, the project did not go according to the proposal. The MC bought more than 200 sheep, but within two weeks nearly half were stolen. The MC organised investigations, but the stolen sheep were never found. This theft exacerbated the tensions among the village residents who began accusing each other. The MC's efforts to find the culprit restored some of the trust among community members. However, as the sheep were never found, the incident was a major blow to the committee's credibility. The MC used the remaining money from the block grant to replace the stolen sheep, but did not have enough funds to buy equipment for the animal product processing centre.

As the livestock project continues, it is hoped that some of the faith village inhabitants once had in the MC will be restored. At the very least, it is hoped that a culture of conflict mitigation and tolerance will continue to take root and these communities will be able to avoid a return to their previous state of mutual distrust and animosity.

Lessons Learned

Though these projects are still being implemented, four major lessons have already been learned: the importance of involving all stakeholder groups equitably, the importance of expectation management, the role of incentives and community contributions to instilling ownership and finally the role of continuous monitoring and evaluation.

Involvement of all stakeholder groups

It is impossible to expect that any programme will be able to build social cohesion and address past conflicts without the transparent

involvement of all stakeholder groups. At all three implementation sites, the involvement of local leaders, women, youth, former adversaries and other locally relevant actors is recognized to be crucial to the projects' sustainability and success. It is essential that all parties to the conflict are equally invested and understand the benefits of their participation in the project.

In the Shoulgara site, in particular, equitable representation from all stakeholder groups has been critical. At several points, notably during the MC elections, serious challenges to the project arose mainly around group representation. One man from Astaer Kot protested against Karbosi having six representatives while each individual village of the *manteqa* only had two representatives. ACTED staff, however, mediated between the groups on this point for weeks prior to the election and then again for several hours on election day until all community members were convinced that the allotment of representatives was fair.

In Afghanistan, ensuring the equal participation of women is a challenge. Attempts were made to include women in culturally appropriate ways. The MCs were split into men's and women's subcommittees and the groups met separately. Regardless of the myriad attempts to ensure equality among the subcommittees, the men's decisions still often overshadowed those of the women. In Nahri Shahi and Shoulgara it was difficult to receive permission from village leaders for women to travel to meetings and events. The CPAU training also proved a challenge as the trainers were all men, who were not permitted access to the women's groups in some villages. Eventually, the women's committees were combined with the girl's committees and CPAU trained female ACTED staff to carry out the MC and PC training sessions. This compromise meant

that the CPAU training could not target the appropriate age level and the women did not get the benefit of working directly with CPAU trainers. Women are a key demographic in Afghanistan who are often overlooked because their inclusion is difficult. However, women have powers in the domestic setting and ensuring the lessons they impart to their children are in keeping with the conflict resolution message is critical. In order for social empowerment programmes to have a lasting impact on a community women must be included in the solution.

Due to sheer numbers, youth are an important stakeholder group in Afghanistan. To accommodate this group, a puppet show was part of project implementation in all three sites. In this public outreach component, local youth, led by the elected PC, worked together with the Afghan NGO 'Afghan Mobile Mini Circus for Children' (MMCC) to produce an educational puppet show. They wrote a conflict resolution-related script, created their own puppets and made background sets. They then gathered adults from all sides of the conflict for their performance. The puppet show was filmed and made into a DVD, which was later shown throughout the community in a 'travelling road-show' project.

The puppet show was able to involve several key stakeholder groups. The youth themselves were targeted and encouraged to own the process. The youth then included their entire families from all sides of the conflict by encouraging them to attend the public performance and sit together with former adversaries in an audience. They then led their family and friends in watching the outreach DVD of the performance. In these ways, the puppet show used the energy and talent of the elected youth group to bring all members of the community together.

The involvement of youth is essential in an area like Khowja Alwan where, during their time as refugees, young people were exposed to activities outside of the home, including attending school or working jobs. Now that they have been resettled, they find themselves without structured activities, without a school to attend and often without hope for the future. Their involvement in the PC allows them to focus their energies on making their community stronger, allowing them to become part of the solution and preemptively addressing areas of possible tension.

The importance of expectation management

For any project to be successful there is an important need to manage beneficiary expectations. For example, if beneficiaries believed that ACTED's nine month long intervention would 'solve' decades old conflicts then the project would fail, as this task is impossible within the timeframe. This lesson about expectations was learned from UNHCR following their 2005 'peaceful coexistence' project in Parwan Province. UNHCR's community based 'peace shuras' proposed building a \$20 million dam to resolve a water conflict between two communities. The dam project was well beyond the means of the implementation partners and the 'peace shuras' were asked to develop new, less expensive, project proposals (UNHCR 2007, p.4). This initial misunderstanding about what types of projects would be accepted created tension between the implementation partners and the 'peace shuras'. With this knowledge, the ACTED Conflict Resolution project resolved to make expectation management a key focus point.

This is one reason why the sensitization and public outreach components of the project are so important. Not only do monitors

need to follow the actual and perceived progress of the project, they also need to gauge local understandings of the projects' goals. This will enable the NGO to modify outreach messages if necessary to ensure beneficiary expectations match program objectives.

The importance of incentive and community contribution to fostering ownership

In order to encourage the conflicting parties to participate in this project, ACTED provided a 'hardware' incentive. A development project of the communities' choosing, as has been learned through NSP, provides a strong incentive to participation. Moreover, beneficiaries are in the best position to evaluate what the development priorities are for their community. Within the project, each stakeholder understood the benefit of participation and thus was willing to sit down with their former adversaries to develop projects. Since the MC is in charge of developing the project to be funded by the development block grant, the NGO becomes only a facilitator in the process — there to ensure that realistic and fair ideas are proposed. A 'hardware' incentive might have been enough motivation to encourage all parties to participate, but it is the introduction of a community contribution that ensures long-term project ownership and sustainability.

Linked to the concept of individual stakeholder involvement, the community contribution represents investment on a community-wide level. Each community is required to contribute at least ten percent of the total cost of the 'hardware' component, either through labour, cash contributions or material support. In this way, it is ensured that each community is invested in the project and

increases the likelihood that they will feel ownership over the project outcomes.

The NGO provides expertise and structure, the community themselves must design, partially fund and oversee the implementation of the 'hardware' project. From a community sports ground in Khowja Alwan to a livestock project in Shoulgara, these communities are committed to their own development projects from start to finish. While it is still too early in these projects' implementation to evaluate if the community contributions will result in project sustainability, the initial signs are good and all parties thus far seem satisfied.⁹

The importance of ongoing monitoring

The conflict resolution project includes an extensive monitoring component. This constant monitoring occurs to ensure the project is being implemented in the way agreed upon by the NGO and the community. In this way, the NGO's beneficiary accountability can be assessed. Through the presence of impartial monitors, beneficiaries can express concerns about the NGO and can feel they have an outlet to voice any concerns that may arise. The NGO, in turn, can assess these concerns and react quickly while there is time to make necessary changes.

Often NGOs are criticized for only evaluating a project after the completion of all activities. While this may meet the terms of donor contracts, only having a final evaluation decreases the NGO's opportunity to improve implementation while their projects are ongoing. It also denies beneficiaries a voice in the projects. It was this effort to increase beneficiary accountability and to ensure the

⁹ Further information on the progress of each project will be available at www.acted.org/english from approximately August 2008.

project was implemented in the most effective and transparent manner possible that ongoing monitoring became an integral project component.

In past projects, such as the previously mentioned UNHCR ‘peaceful coexistence’ programme, monitoring was isolated as being an area of suggested improvement for the future. Monitoring should be two-way, using key informant interviews and focus group discussions as well as direct observation to determine the effectiveness of the project. Monitors should be separate from the project implementation staff in order to ensure a level of impartiality in ongoing assessments. These have been some of the monitoring goals of the Conflict Resolution projects. As each component of the programme was rolled out in different sites at different times, it was possible to gauge effectiveness and make necessary changes before introducing the component in the next site. For example, when MC elections were held in Khowja Alwan it was discovered that the process of electing the MC executive board was not clear. Therefore, when elections were promoted in Nahri Shahi this aspect of public outreach was clarified and the Nahri Shahi elections were able to avoid this problem. Monthly monitoring reports were prepared by two dedicated monitors who spent, on average, one week a month in each of the sites to ensure lessons were effectively transmitted between sites.

In order for community members to feel truly empowered, it is essential that the implementing organization has a mechanism to gauge their opinions and make changes, if necessary, to ensure that the best possible implementation occurs. The only way to achieve this is through ongoing monitoring.

Where from here?

Through the use of incentives, inclusion of all stakeholders through a democratic process, ongoing monitoring and the required material investment of each community, this social empowerment programme is testing the links between conflict resolution, the restoration of civic trust and development. Though it is too soon to judge the eventual impact of this project on each community, the outlook thus far has been mostly positive.

It is envisioned that these communities' MCs will continue into the future beyond the summer of 2008, when ACTED hands over the development projects to each community. The hope is that each MC will have become sufficiently engrained in the culture to be self-sustaining. Already this is happening on varying levels in each community.

In Shoulgara, the MC is already operating as a conflict mitigation body outside the scope of the ACTED project. For example, the MC successfully resolved a dispute between two families: one from Karbosi and one from the village of Araba. During the Taliban regime, a Karbosi man wanted to marry an Araba girl. The brother of the girl did not agree and, in response, relatives of the Karbosi man killed four of the girl's brothers. The girl's relatives then killed a person from Karbosi in revenge and since that time, the conflict has not been resolved. The newly elected MC gathered the relevant representatives and spent 10 days negotiating between them. A truce was reached. The MC has said they will continue to monitor the situation (ACTED AMEU 2008). The fact that the MC was seen as legitimate by the parties to this conflict gives great hope, though no guarantee, for the future sustainability of the mechanism.

Most important within all of these projects is the idea of, and commitment to, process. The actual MC itself and even the implementation of the hardware projects are not important. What is important is all members of the community feel that they are an equal partner in their communities' struggle toward peace and development. Each stakeholder group must feel they are being treated with dignity and respect by their fellow community members. They must feel they share a joint commitment to commonly held norms and values. It is through this restoration of horizontal civic trust that communities in Khojwa Alwan, Nahri Shahi and Shoulgara can work together to ensure their communities are able to reach their full development potential.

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